



The “Third C”: College, Career, and Citizenship

Citation

Levinson, Meira. 2012. The “Third C”: College, Career, and Citizenship. In *Making civics count : citizenship education for a new generation*, ed. David E. Campbell, Meira Levinson, and Frederick M. Hess, 247-258. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:10860785>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Conclusion

The “Third C”: College, Career, and *Citizenship*

Meira Levinson

In David Campbell, Meira Levinson, and Frederick Hess, eds. *Making Civics Count*. Harvard Education Press. pp. 247-258.

The case for improving and expanding civic education in U.S. schools in the early twenty-first century feels both self-evident and doomed. It’s self-evident because we can all agree—left, right, or centrist; policy wonk, antigovernment crusader, or news avoider; youth or adult; Occupier or Tea Partier; isolationist or internationalist—that American politics is broken. Congress has an 11 percent approval rating—a number that leads one to ask not why it’s so low, but what on earth those 11 percent who still approve of Congress could be thinking.¹ The United States is facing domestic and international challenges of massive proportions, yet seems unable to take basic steps to put its economic, social, or diplomatic house in order. State and even local politics are also increasingly riven by seemingly unbridgeable partisan divides, leading to municipal bankruptcies, shutdowns in state governments, collapses in services, and even vigilante legislation and justice.

At the same time, advocacy for high-quality civic learning feels doomed because civic educators may be seen as just one more special interest jockeying for school leaders’ and policymakers’ attention. Advocates of physical and health education introduce the threatening specter of the obesity epidemic, warning of skyrocketing health-care costs and the progressive disabling of the workforce. Arts education advocates speak of the importance of creativity, intercultural understanding, and whole-child development. Foreign-language boosters make dire

forecasts about U.S. children’s lack of preparedness to succeed in a globalized, multilingual economy. What good are science and history education, they ask, in the absence of a capacity to speak Mandarin or to cross other cultural and linguistic boundaries? Amid this cacophony of voices all trying to be heard above the brass band of reading and math instruction, civic education advocates may seem to be just another set of special pleaders contributing to the din. States’ overriding focus on the Common Core Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics risks further sidelining civic learning. Furthermore, contemporary concerns about education in underserved communities, the closure of “dropout factories,” and the elimination of the academic achievement gap may crowd out apparently tangential calls for better civic education.

Given these concerns, how can advocates of high-quality civic education get beyond preaching to the choir? Civic education boosters face the same challenge in the contemporary education policy landscape that Keith Barton explicates in his analysis of teacher education programs in chapter 7: “Not only must teachers know how to teach for democracy, but they must also *want* to do so.” The consensus that emerges across the chapters in this book—a consensus that was not foreordained, given that they were written by authors from ideologically diverse vantage points, from a wide variety of disciplines, and on a range of topics in civic education—suggests that educators and scholars know quite a bit about how to teach for democracy. So why is it not happening? Could it be that people don’t *want* to do so?

The Case for the “Third C”

As David Campbell mentions in the introduction, schools and policymakers over the past fifty years have not wanted to spend time on civic education, because school-based civic

education was thought to be irrelevant to students' civic learning. Scholars and educators now know that this was wrong. Experiential civic education, classroom discussion, student participation in school governance, digital civic media production, current-events lessons, media literacy curricula, and service-learning are all effective means by which schools can increase students' civic knowledge, engagement, and identity (chapters 1, 2, 5, 6, 9). Students also learn democratic skills and habits in response to school context. Schools that create intentional civic spaces teach students how to interact respectfully and productively with diverse others, since this learning does not occur naturally on its own (chapter 4). Possibly as a result, different kinds of schools (private, parochial, charter, and traditional public) have measurably disparate impacts on their students' civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, and present and future action (chapter 10). Students' civic learning is also directly dependent on the quality of teaching they experience (chapter 8). These findings confirm that schools have an essential role to play in ensuring that all Americans develop the capacities and inclination for effective, thoughtful, public-spirited civic engagement.

This emphasis on *all* Americans is important because it provides a powerful response to those who claim that the math and reading achievement gap should remain the primary, even sole, focus of educators and policymakers. I fully agree that educational equity is a matter of grave concern, as equality of educational opportunity is both a civil and a moral obligation in any democracy. But this actually reinforces my point. Democracies demand equality of opportunity not solely because they value citizens' equal access to college and career, although they may well do so, but also because democracies are based on the premise of *civic* equality. This premise is instantiated in such democratic principles as "One person, one vote," and "All are equal before the law." As I have written elsewhere, "we cannot be said to live in a true democracy if

individuals or members of groups systematically possess unequal civic and political power, if some votes and voices count more or less than others, or if some stand either above or below the law . . . Without civic knowledge, skills, identity, and propensity toward engagement, some students are essentially disenfranchised and disempowered. Civic learning opportunities are thus essential for promoting civic equity as a democratic ideal.”²

Hence, democratic nations like the United States must educate for college, career, *and* citizenship. Civic readiness is the essential “third C” in a democracy. This isn’t a distraction from the real work of schools and educational policymakers; it is a crucial part of that work. In this respect, too, the inequities in opportunities for civic learning and engagement that many of this volume’s authors highlight in their chapters are as important to combat as are inequities in other academic domains. The United States is challenged by a civic empowerment gap as much as an academic achievement gap, and schools have a responsibility to help citizens overcome both assaults on democracy and individual freedom.³

In addition, Peter Levine points to provocative evidence that education for civic empowerment actually increases students’ likely academic achievement. Civics and academics are not in competition with one another; rather, they symbiotically reinforce one another. Political scientists have known for a very long time that higher levels of educational achievement map directly onto higher levels of civic knowledge, skills, and engagement.⁴ Academic achievement definitely feeds civic empowerment. The relationship seems to go the other way as well. Levine cites studies showing that civic and historical knowledge may increase students’ reading comprehension skills; service-learning has a positive effect on students’ graduation rate; and civic engagement experiences increase young people’s prosocial beliefs and actions in ways that are directly correlated with likely subsequent academic performance. I don’t want to push

this argument too strongly. The data are still suggestive rather than dispositive; high-quality studies are relatively few and far between. Even more to the point, I don't want to suggest that civic education has value only if it also serves academic ends. Citizenship is a third pillar of education, not merely a handmaiden to college and career goals. It is nonetheless useful, and encouraging, to see evidence that attention to one might advance the cause of the others.

Schools Within a Larger Civic Ecology

As the contributors to this book attempt to convince educators, policymakers, and members of the public to *want* high-quality civic education, it is essential to point out that such education looks radically different from traditional civics classes. The knowledge, skills, attitudes, actions, and pedagogies called for above—in other words, for which there is robust evidence of their effectiveness in preparing young people to be active, informed participants in democratic life—are far removed from the dusty flowcharts, lists, and lectures that pass for civics in many schools and districts. High-quality civic education is dynamic, responsive to the present, committed to equity, capable of moving among virtual and offline worlds, attentive to identity and difference, and supportive of student action. The Spencer Foundation has recently dubbed such approaches “the new civics,” which is an apt description of civic learning’s need to move in a new direction.

The individual authors featured in this volume have been at the forefront of advocating for new-civics approaches over the past decade or more. There is often wisdom to be gained in the collective, however, that does not emerge as readily from individual members. Reading these chapters as a whole, I was especially struck by their collective illumination of schools’ positioning within a larger *civic ecology*. This insight generates at least three important

implications for why, how, and how much schools should take on responsibility for civic education.

First, schools are members of a larger set of institutions that have historically inducted young people into American civic and political life. These include churches and other religious organizations, neighborhood and fraternal associations, unions, youth groups such as scouting and 4-H, other voluntary associations, and news media. Levine elucidates the ways in which many of these nonschool institutions both served to promote civic learning and engagement in the past and have withered in contemporary civil society. Membership in voluntary associations, neighborhood groups, and unions has plummeted. The public sphere has become dominated by professional citizens—those who make their living in government, media, lobbying, or nonprofit work—rather than serving as an egalitarian and inclusive meeting ground for the public as a whole. Newspaper readership and hard-news viewership has dropped precipitously over the past few decades; it has not systematically been replaced by other serious sources of information such as news-oriented Web sites.

Admittedly, other forms of media may promote civic learning as a by-product of their actions. In chapter 1, for example, Niemi notes that over 90 percent of twelfth-graders accurately answered test questions about “the right to a lawyer, the right to remain silent, and the meaning of the right to counsel.” He notes that students may be highly knowledgeable about these rights because they are mentioned in the Constitution—or maybe because these rights are “what students see on television and in the movies.” I wager that if the National Assessment of Educational Progress similarly included questions about forensic pathology, virtually every teenager with a television set (and hence with access to *CSI*) would nail the test. Unlike hard-news shows, however, these television dramas are not designed to promote civic learning. This is

not to castigate the civic knowledge that may be gained on occasion from watching these shows. Rather, it is to point out that the civic ecology of contemporary American institutions is both more attenuated and less intentional than it has been in the past.

Similarly, Joseph Kahne, Jacqueline Ullman, and Ellen Middaugh point to new forms of democratic association that are springing up online in the form of interest-driven digital communities, online forums for political and civic dialogue and action, and even civically oriented video games. Many young people are excited by these opportunities and become more civically knowledgeable and engaged as a result. Nonetheless, these authors also point out that many other youth are occupying “empty chambers” online in which no civic learning or engagement takes place. Yes, Facebook may have facilitated the Arab Spring of 2011. But no, hanging out on Facebook and posting comments on friends’ walls does not in itself advance young people’s civic development.

Given these declines in the associations that historically promoted civic learning and engagement, and the uncertain contribution of new forms of digital media and networking, schools are left to pick up the slack. Citizens’ knowledgeable and effective participation in public life is as important as ever. No longer, however, can schools merely complement and reinforce the civic lessons imparted by the daily newspaper, the church ladies’ society, the union stewards’ meeting, or the Welcome Wagon. The erosion of these organizations leaves a more barren plain in which schools stand out as one of the few institutions positioned to impart the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experience to prepare active, informed participants in democratic life. This makes the achievement of high-quality, school-based civic education more important than ever.

Second, schools function within a broader civic ecology insofar as they must mediate students' and teachers' incoming civic beliefs, habits, and values. Schools don't operate in a civic vacuum. They instead must deal with the already-developed perspectives of those who walk through their doors. Chapter 4, in which I discuss the treatment of "undesirable," "deviant," or even "illegal" group members within schools, addresses these challenges most directly. External conflicts about the civic and legal standing of gays, immigrants, Muslims, drug users, and others can spill into schools, despite educators' desperate wishes to remain neutral and above the fray. In chapter 7, Barton suggests that teachers' very desire for conflict avoidance reveals their adherence to non- and even anti-democratic values. They see themselves as surrogate mothers with private, parental duties of protection, for instance, not as representatives of the state with public duties to develop children's civic capacities. As a result, even schools that have a strong democratic ethos may find themselves undermined by teachers who are unable or unwilling to "subject" their students to democratic deliberation and disagreement. Diana Hess and John Zola point out that sometimes, students themselves are the only ones who can dislodge teachers' assumptions about what degree of civic education is possible: "It is not uncommon for the student work to actually *raise* teachers' expectations about what students can and should be expected to learn." As Levine and Kahne, Ullman, and Middaugh argue, however, this laudable attempt is often complicated when patterns of civic inequality are replicated within the classroom and school. Again, the ecology of civic patterns, opportunities, and values outside schools come to shape what is seen as civically feasible inside schools.

The relationship between civil society and schools, however, is not monodirectional. This leads to the third insight about schools' role within the larger civic ecology: namely, that schools themselves are civic actors. They—and the students they teach—can and should interact with the

world beyond their walls. In chapter 3, Michael Johanek offers three fascinating past examples of schools' acting within and upon the community as self-conscious civic institutions. "Civic education was understood to encompass the school's role as an *actor* within neighborhood life," he explains. His historical case studies reveal schools and districts that attempted to revive rural communities in West Virginia through community programming, that organized self-governing adult centers and civic clubs in Rochester, and that engaged East Harlem students in community-based research projects and civic action campaigns to address a wide variety of social, economic, and political issues. Shifting from historical to contemporary analysis, Anna Saavedra and James Youniss each provide intriguing present-day models of schools and students as civic actors. Through examples of middle school science students whose research and public advocacy work led to changes in Iowa's waste disposal laws, or Youth Council members in Chicago whose violence-reduction recommendations were adopted district-wide, these scholars provide ample evidence that, as Youniss declares, "schools can make a difference that reaches into communities, government, and the political system." In emphasizing the importance of teaching current events, Levine and Niemi also reinforce the idea that schools should engage young people in civic life now, not just in the future as adults. Finally, Kahne, Ullman, and Middaugh provide provocative anticipation of schools' and students' direct civic engagement in the future through online communities, digitally mediated action in the real world, and authentic civic work that earns students recognition for civic accomplishments.

Civic Education on the Leading Edge

I have thus far discussed three ways to understand schools as positioned within the larger civic ecology of society. I have suggested that schools may step into the breach to make up for

the diminution of other civically educative institutions. I showed how schools will necessarily find themselves needing to respond to broader civic disputes and values as these enter the walls of the school. Finally, I have also suggested that historical, present-day, and future-oriented examples demonstrate multiple ways in which schools and students may act upon civil society. Perhaps the most consistent insight deriving from this collection of essays, however, is that schools can create their *own* civic ecology—and that this may be the most effective and important thing they do in service of student civic learning.

Time and again, these chapters show that schools' communities and cultures matter. Youniss reveals the crucial roles of an open classroom climate, student participation in school governance, and participation in service that reflects schools' "conscious" intent to induct students into particular civic identities and traditions. Saavedra illuminates the ways in which "dynamic civic education strategies" create classrooms and schools that engage students' heads and hearts in civic participation. My own chapter shows how schools can help students learn to respect one another and work together across lines of difference by intentionally and transparently leveraging diversity within the school community. At the same time, I argue, the school community must be constructed so as to offer all students and families a "warm, inclusive embrace"; to do otherwise would be to betray the school's civic and moral responsibilities. Campbell in chapter 10 similarly emphasizes that a school's "ethos," or "the norms encouraged, shared, and 'enforced' within a school community" has "a substantial, and enduring, effect on the civic engagement of its students." Hess and Zola reveal potentially similar mechanisms at work with teachers. It is when teachers themselves experience civically engaging and empowering pedagogies like a Socratic seminar that they become inclined and equipped to use such techniques with their own students.

Taken together, these intersections and overlaps reveal the permeability of schools and society. Schools permeate civil society. Civil society permeates schools. Neither schools nor social institutions function as separate, independent entities. This insight should be obvious, but educational reform discourse currently assumes a rigid dichotomy between the two. Citizens often fail to recognize schools even as social institutions, let alone as institutions reflective of, responsive to, embedded within, and effective upon society.

Insofar as civic education scholarship cuts through such false dichotomies, it can and should be a leader in education reform, not an also-ran. Civic education is essential for democracy's health, communities' well-being, and students' engagement and empowerment. As the chapters in this book reveal, high-quality civic education practices also demonstrate the power of teaching and learning within, through, and beyond the school walls. These practices pull contemporary society into the school, for example, by incorporating the study of current events, and push the school into society through such means as service-learning, community organizing, action civics, and digital media production. Furthermore, civic education also requires that educators turn schools into the kind of model civic communities that any American would hope to see instantiated in the larger society. This is necessary as a means of building students' civic capacities now and influencing their vision of the kind of society youth will help create in the future. Saavedra points out that this is not "your father's" civics. Instead, it is exactly the kind of dynamic, contextualized learning and teaching that is called for across all subject areas in twenty-first-century schools.

In addition to providing cutting-edge models of intellectual content and pedagogical practice, civic education has the potential to lead the way into a new generation of educational assessment. Until recently, civics was arguably among the hardest disciplines to assess

meaningfully, because children were legally prevented from enacting many of the public roles of citizens: serving on juries, voting, running for office, or even volunteering in an organization without a parent in tow. Those interested in civic education were therefore reduced to measuring students' decontextualized knowledge and skills. In all other school-based subjects, educators can in theory assess children's capacities to enact the disciplines that they teach (even if this occurs only sporadically in practice). Assessments can have students read, do math, conduct science experiments, create art, or play sports. But how could one assess young people's capacities to *be* citizens?

Thanks to the insights of the collected scholars, educators, policymakers, and interested citizens can now see that civics may offer some of the most authentic and exciting opportunities in educational assessment and pedagogical practice—ones that could serve as models for other disciplines. Multiplayer real-time simulations, digital civic portfolios and badges, authentic online civic engagement, and demonstrated off-line civic action are all promising avenues for civics instruction and assessment. Even the simulated versions of these enable children to *do* civics and interact *as* citizens in the process of acquiring and demonstrating their learning. But perhaps even more excitingly, many of these approaches enable children to make a real, meaningful, lasting contribution to the world from a very young age. Frankly, most youth won't write original poems or essays of lasting value to others. Nor are they likely to do original mathematics that engages adults other than their teachers and parents. But young people *can* make authentic civic contributions that influence or even transform individuals' and communities' lives for years to come. This is an incredible opportunity for all concerned. Let's make the "third C" of citizenship education a reality.

¹ Real Clear Politics, “Congressional Job Approval,” Accessed March 19, 2012, at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/congressional_job_approval-903.html.

² Jonathan Gould, ed., *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools* (Philadelphia: Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania; Silver Spring, MD: The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011), 18.

³ For more on the civic empowerment gap, see Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁴ Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).